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04753407 **Supplier Number:** 20636193

Wake Up Your Web Site.(NetObjects' Fusion 3.0 and Adobe Systems PageMill 3.0 Web authoring software) (Software Review)(Evaluation)

Mendelson, Edward

PC Magazine , v17 , n11 , p60(2)

June 9 , 1998

Document Type: Evaluation

ISSN: 0888-8507

Language: English **Record Type:** Fulltext

Word Count: 1916 **Line Count:** 00149

Text:

Brand-new versions of Fusion and PageMill court both novice and professional Web designers

Web Authoring Tools

The third generation of WYSIWYG Web site editors has arrived. NetObjects Fusion 3.0 (\$295 list; \$99 upgrade) and Adobe PageMill 3.0 (\$100 street; \$49 upgrade) both create elegant Web pages and manage complete Web sites, but in strikingly different ways. NetObjects Fusion is a high-end automated package bristling with up-to-date features like Dynamic HTML (DHTML) and is even more ambitious and more highly automated than our Editors' Choice-winning Microsoft FrontPage 98 ("Web Authoring Tools," January 20, 1998). PageMill is a midlevel package best suited for building relatively simple Web sites at top speed. Either package lets you create and upload a Web site with a minimum of technical knowledge and a maximum of ease.

Netobjects Fusion 3.0

A giant factory for constructing Web sites, NetObjects Fusion 3.0 makes every other HTML editor seem like a small-scale artist's studio by comparison. The package automatically applies well-designed, customizable graphics styles to an entire Web site, builds navigation bars, applies DHTML formatting for rollover and animation effects, arranges text and image elements with single-pixel precision, and uploads your site to a remote server. Everything in the program, including a message board and a small-scale database suitable for product descriptions or an employee directory, can be built without any knowledge of HTML, although learning the program becomes more difficult when you move beyond its basic features.

Fusion's earlier versions appealed mostly to designers who liked its ability to produce graphics-rich Web sites and didn't object to the bloated and mostly unreadable HTML code the program generated. This new version retains the precise design tools of earlier versions and enhances control over the size of frames and borders. Version 3.0 also adds new options for

generating lean, readable HTML code. If your target audience uses Version 4.0 browsers, you can set Fusion to output HTML with stylesheet and JavaScript features for maximum elegance with minimal file sizes.

What you'll see

Fusion's interface uses five separate views: a tree-style site diagram; a page editor; a stylesheet gallery; a list of files, applets, variables, and other assets included in a site; and a control panel for publishing sites to a folder on your hard disk or a remote Web site. Basic features are easy to use: You can import graphics and other files merely by dragging them into the program window, letting the program copy them transparently to the right folder on disk, and uploading them to a remote site.

In a misguided effort to make the program look simple, NetObjects provided no menu or toolbar access to many of Fusion's advanced features. Instead, these features are hidden in pop-up menus that appear only if you know exactly where to click the mouse. To add a navigation border to a page that doesn't have one, you must click on the gray area outside the page. (You may even have to use the scroll bars to make the gray area visible.) The only way to learn this technique is by trial and error or by close study of the 500-page manual.

All other major WYSIWYG Web editors resemble word processors that let you enter text by typing directly on the page. Fusion, by contrast, resembles a desktop publishing package in which everything on a page is surrounded by a visible or invisible box. You must first draw a text box before you can type even a headline. But Fusion compensates for this kind of inconvenience by offering powerful graphic features, such as the ability to convert text into graphics. You can use any font installed on your system and rotate a line of type to any angle. Unlike FrontPage or PageMill, Fusion won't automatically convert imported graphics into GIF or JPEG formats.

Also unlike FrontPage or PageMill, Fusion won't let you edit more than one page at a time, nor does it have a window for directly editing the HTML code generated by the program. This new version, however, lets you view but not change the HTML code it generates. A new feature lets you insert your own custom HTML code in addition to Fusion-generated code.

Another new feature lets you draw a box that displays the content of any existing HTML page on your disk, but the contents of these external pages appear only when you publish your site to your server or preview it in a browser. In Fusion's editing screen, the external page appears only as an icon, and if you want to view or edit its contents, you click on the icon and edit the contents in a code-based HTML editor. (Allaire's HomeSite 3.0 is included in the package).

Adding Dynamic HTML

Fusion's new JavaScript-based DHTML features work by default in both Internet Explorer 4.0 and Netscape Communicator 4.0, but you can reduce the size of the code by targeting only one browser. You can build these features only by navigating a complex tree diagram of the page structure. You will probably have to call NetObject's helpful technical support before you figure out that some effects--such as opening a second browser window--must be linked to the top level of the tree, while others need to be linked to a lower level. Keep in mind that only Macromedia's Dreamweaver offers comparable DHTML features, and it isn't any easier to use (for our review of Dreamweaver, see "Weaving a Web Page," February 24, 1998).

The message board feature installs a common gateway interface (CGI) script on your Web server but doesn't require special server extensions like the ones used by FrontPage. Fusion's built-in features can be extended with third-party components like Coolmaps' \$39 GoDropDown, which inserts a drop-down menu with customizable links, or the same vendor's \$99 DataDrill, which lets visitors zero in on pages created by Fusion's built-in database

feature (coolmaps.com). Available freeware extensions include WebObjects full-text search component (www.webobjects.net).

Both Fusion and FrontPage can apply consistent visual styles to a Web site and automatically build navigation bars. FrontPage's word processor-style interface and well-designed menus make it the first choice for most users, even though some of its graphics and DHTML features are visible only in Internet Explorer. Graphics professionals will prefer Fusion's precise control over layout, while cutting-edge Web designers will prefer its extensive DHTML and its equal-rights policy toward both Netscape and Microsoft browsers.

NetObjects Fusion 3.0. List price: \$295; upgrade, \$99. Requires: 32MB RAM, 50MB hard disk space, Microsoft Windows 95 or NT 4.0. NetObjects Inc., Redwood City, CA; 888-449-6400; 650-482-3200; www.netobjects.com. Choose 407 at pcmag.com/infolink.

Adobe PageMill 3.0

If you plan to build a small-scale, graphics-rich Web site, Adobe PageMill 3.0 is worth considering. But don't expect to find the kind of power and flexibility offered by other Adobe products such as PageMaker or Photoshop.

PageMill doesn't match FrontPage or Fusion in automation or ease of use, but Version 3.0 adds site-management functions to the WYSIWYG page-editing features of previous versions. Java applets are now live in the editing window, and the interface is less clumsy than in previous versions. Dozens of conveniences have been added--such as a feature that automatically remembers where you left the cursor when you closed a file. But awkward patches remain, and no tools are provided for building up-to-date Web features like cascading stylesheets, scripting, or DHTML.

Hitting the target market

PageMill targets small businesses with little HTML expertise. These users are served well with a toolbar-based, word processor-style editing screen and a pasteboard for storing graphics, text, and links for reuse on multiple pages. A WYSIWYG find feature lets you drag images into a dialog box and automatically replace one image with another throughout a Web site.

Clicking on an icon or pressing Ctrl-Enter toggles you between editing mode and a preview mode that uses either PageMill's internal previewer or code from Internet Explorer. Another keystroke opens a source-code editor, which is inconveniently displayed in the same frame as the WYSIWYG view of the page; this may require you to resize a narrow frame in order to edit the source code, losing the frame's original dimensions in the process.

Users can drag multimedia files from Windows Explorer into PageMill, but the program isn't smart enough to copy the files into the same directory with the Web page that displays them. The new site manager has a command to copy graphics files into a specified folder and upload them to a Web site, but it isn't as easy to use as the fully automated graphics file handling in FrontPage and Fusion.

The site manager displays all the internal and remote links in a site, and a right click on any file or link brings up a detailed property menu. You can drag pages to different locations in the site map, and links between the pages are updated automatically. The Link Verification feature gets confused when a link contains strings used to call up a page from a remote database and reports these links as unverified, even though they function correctly in a browser.

Frames, tables, and forms are easy to build, and the package includes 24 sample CGI scripts you can install on a Web server for processing forms and creating message boards. But these scripts aren't integrated into PageMill in the way similar functions are integrated into FrontPage and Fusion. There are no templates for creating a set of consistent pages, and you can't delete items from the pasteboard without dragging them into the editing screen first.

PageMill remains one step behind advanced editors like FrontPage, Fusion, and Dreamweaver in convenience and features, but it's fast, efficient, and less intimidating. Web beginners who are willing to skim a 50-page getting started manual can use it to build a good-looking site in a few hours.

Adobe PageMill 3.0. Street price: \$100; upgrade, \$49. Requires: 16MB RAM, 20MB hard disk space, Windows 95 or NT 4.0. Adobe Systems Inc., San Jose, CA, 800-411-8657, 408-536-6000; www.adobe.com. Choose 406 at www.pcmag.com/infolink.

Fusion's Dynamic actions are applied from fly-out menus.

The Master Border can appear in the browser as a separate frame or as a region of the page.

Fusion ships with about 50 graphics styles.

Built-in styles can be modified, and text in banners and buttons can be rotated.

PageMill's Inspector dialog displays the properties of the current object and page.

A graphics-based search and replace feature lets you replace one graphic with another by dragging them into the dialog box.

PageMill's overview lists all files and errors--even when the errors are not really errors but JavaScript code that PageMill doesn't understand.

Context menus are available when you right click on any file in the tree diagram.

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Company Names: NetObjects Inc.--Products; Adobe Systems Inc.--Products

Descriptors: World Wide Web--Computer programs; Program development software--Evaluation

Product/Industry Names: 7372682 (Internet Server Software)

SIC Codes: 7372 Prepackaged software

Ticker Symbols: ADBE

Trade Names: NetObjects Fusion 3.0 (Web site management software)--Evaluation; Adobe PageMill 3.0 (Web authoring software)--Evaluation

Special Features: other; illustration

File Segment: CD File 275

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